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Fifty years of feminist organising in Britain - challenges for the future

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It's just over 50 years ago since the first women's liberation conference in Britain took place at Ruskin on 27 February 1970 so International Women's Day 2020 seems an appropriate time to look back in order to try to move forward.

This article explores three questions. It asks what has changed in women in



Britain's lives in terms of paid work over those 50 years- and in what senses those changes represent improvements or the reverse - or something more ambiguous. I look at some of the shifts in forms of women's organising over that period - and assess the gains, losses and sideways steps. I also look at the international context of women's organising today and the difference between the role women in Britain are playing today than 50 years ago - and what we can do to strengthen what seem to be very weak internationalist links today.

The Ruskin conference [1] morphed out of what started as a women's history conference when much greater numbers of women than expected showed interest, with 600 attending in the end. There was a crèche - run by men. . An initial list of demands was floated but it was not until the second Women's Liberation conference in Skegness in 1971 that the movement adopted these four demands:

1. Equal pay

2. Equal educational and job opportunities
3. Free contraception and abortion on demand
4. Free 24-hour nurseries

I don't have the scope in this article to explore each of these four issues, so I'm just going to focus on Equal Pay.

There was an article in the *Guardian* a few days ago with analysis from the TUC pointing out that on average women in Britain work 63 days without pay annually because of the gender pay gap [2]. 50 years on not only from the Ruskin conference but also from the passage of the Equal Pay Act - which talked of equal pay for work of equal value - we have not progressed nearly as far as we hoped or expected.

It's good the unions highlighted this on the eve of TUC women's conference. And TUC General Secretary Frances O Grady is certainly right that there should be a legal duty on employers to publish plans for closing that gap. As she notes, at the current rate of only incremental improvement, it will take at least another 50 years to rectify the situation.

But there is a vital dimension missing from the article. Jobs that are done in majority by women are generally devalued - not only pay terms but also by being seen as unskilled. Caring professions are the most notorious of these. As we have seen exposed recently in the latest immigration proposals there is a big overlap between female labour and black and migrant labour.

Social reproduction

I worked for a decade with under-fives: a job done almost exclusively by women. The pay was lousy. When I started you didn't need any qualifications in a social services rather than educational setting. All of this is obviously linked to women's traditional role in social reproduction - caring is something that we are socialised to see as natural both through our own family relationships and the education system (And conversely boys and men are socialised to see such things as unimportant, demeaning, undermining their 'masculinity'). This is fundamental to a world where the pursuit of profit is what is valued - even when it involves producing products that are at best ephemeral if not either useless or damaging of people and planet.

We need to find ways of challenging the devaluing of work that is socially useful ongoing basis - partly because that opens up an important social and political discussion about values and the nature of work. And this, together with fighting job segregation is also essential if we are going to close the gender pay gap in the next 50 years. This means the unions - and the Labour Party - being more proactive on these questions

Casualisation

And the world of work itself has changed massively over the last 50 years.

The female employment rate reached a record high of 72.4% in October-December 2019. The male employment rate was 80.6%. 40% of women in employment were working part-time compared to 13% of men. In 1970 women's employment was at 52.8% [3]. I wasn't able to find the male rate for the same period, but the overall rate was 76.1, so it's clear that the gap was higher then than it is

today.

There have also been enormous changes in the nature of work.

Zero hours contracts didn't exist fifty years ago - though other forms of casual and insecure employment did. Over the last five years [4] zero hours contracts - even more pernicious than other types of precarious employment - have made up between 2.4-2.9 of the total workforce and a higher percentage of women and most particularly of young people.

We have also seen the casualisation of many parts of the public sector whether through the introduction of outsourcing as in significant parts of the NHS (particularly relating to the lowest grade jobs such as cleaning, portering and security where the percentage of women and black workers is even greater than in the sector as a whole) or of the introduction of a marketisation in higher education which among other things has seen a significant reduction of the percentage of people on full time permanent contracts. Jobs that fifty years ago once you got were secure - it was generally your decision if you wanted a change - are now few and far between. And this went alongside the decimation of many manufacturing industries - some of which employed many women especially in light engineering and components.

All of this combines with the dramatic reduction of the rate of unionisation over the same period. In 1970 there were more than 11 million union members in Britain. Numbers grew over subsequent years to a peak of over 13 million in 1979. Thatcher's assault on the best organised sectors alongside the other defeats such as the imposition of the poll tax she was able to inflict on working class communities sharply reversed that trend. In 2018 (the last year for which we currently have figures) the level grew slightly to 6.35 million from a low of 6.23 million in 2016.

As well as overall rates of unionisation falling there has been a decline in levels of industrial action and in union organisation in many workplaces. And there has been a failure of most unions to respond to the changing patterns of work - to find new ways of organising that meet the needs of those in the gig economy which poses very different challenges to organising than when a majority of workers were in large workplaces. On the other hand it is interesting to note the springing up of non-TUC unions; the IWW, IWGB and United Voices which often organise particularly in the gig economy with large numbers of women, black and migrant workers not only as members but often in organising roles.

Violence against women

Returning to the early Women's Liberation conferences in Britain, it's noteworthy that demanding an end to violence against women was only added to the first 4 demands later, together with legal and financial independence, in 1974 at the Edinburgh conference [5]. In contrast, combating violence against women - with movements like Ni Una Menos/Me Too [6] - have been at the centre of new wave of feminist organising internationally over recent years.

Why was this critical issue missing at Ruskin and Skegness at least in terms of the demands agreed at the latter? It certainly wasn't because violence against women did exist. Such violence permeates all forms of class society and takes on particular forms under capitalism where some of the exploited (white adult men) are no longer the property of the exploiters but large numbers of others (indigenous, black, migrants, women and children) while they are not formally owned are still often treated as if they were.

But the concomitant violence -whether it occurred in the workplace, in the family or in society at

large -was much less discussed than it is today. It wasn't an organising issue in workplaces or in places of study. Erin Pizzey [7] set up the first women's refuge in Britain in 1971 but the Women's Aid Federation wasn't set up til 1974 [8]. We certainly campaigned for funding for refuges and particularly in smaller towns I knew women involved in running them - but at the same time looking back I don't think we saw violence against women as as pervasive as we do now.

The use of rape as a weapon of war, for example, is I am absolutely sure as old as war itself but the first time I remember it being written about was during the Bosnian War. When I search now the earliest references are from 1994. And of course we also see rape used against men - precisely as a way to deprive them of their 'manhood'.

I don't remember violence against women - or sexual violence to children -it coming up much in the women's groups I was involved with from 1974 onwards or the feminist conferences I attended. We certainly complained about male attitudes to women's rights to dress how we wanted but it wasn't a central preoccupation.

I certainly have no memory of anyone I knew talking at that time about male violence within the left itself. That's not to say we did not rail against our contributions not being valued in the same way as our male counterparts - like today those of us that operated in mixed fora could cite countless examples of having put forward an idea only to have a man repeat it in slightly different words without acknowledging our authorship - but rape and sexual violence we saw as separate.

Moving forward

We came from generations who in Britain had benefitted from the growth of the welfare state after the War. We expected to be and where socially and economically better off than our parents. Most of us went though further education.

Many of the women at Ruskin and those early WLM conferences had been active in the left previously - in student politics and campaigns such as the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Most saw themselves as socialists. Women saw were inspired by the Black Power movement and saw it to some extent as a model.

In the mid-1970s when I became involved, feminism in Britain pretty much was socialist feminism. The women I knew were active in student politics, in trade unions, in community organising. There were an increasing number of black women's organisations and groups like Women against racism and fascism organising against the far right led by Black women but open to all sisters.

There were never strong liberal feminist organisations in Britain as part of second wave feminism - unlike in the United States where the National Organisation of Women occupied that space. On the other hand, whereas by the mid 70's radical feminism was beginning to organise meetings and conferences, socialist feminism was still the dominant current.

I'm sure this influenced how we thought about the demands the movement should put forward. Axiomatically for us they were things which that should focus on what governments and the state should and could do to improve women's lives, whether by passing laws that gave us rights (Equal Pay, Abortion) or by giving resources and funding to organisations that would provide services we needed (Childcare, abortion, education)

It's certainly not that we didn't think individual behaviour was important. The personal is political, a key slogan of the women's movement, comes from the USA in the late sixties but was just as popular

in Britain a decade later.

We were optimistic about political change. And as we changed individually and collectively through our political organising, we had the aspiration, sometimes even the expectation, that everyone else would follow our lead. We didn't for example predict things like the rise of religious fundamentalism; a force which today is a huge threat to women - and indeed to class organising - across the globe.

New wave

There are many things that are different about the current wave of feminist organising than that which started 50 years ago, and some things that are very similar.

Both processes have been very much led by young women. The wave today, particularly in Argentina which was one of its most important crucibles, takes inspiration from and pays homage to the fights and fighters of the past. Feminist organising in Argentina, as throughout Latin America, has much more of a grass roots trajectory than is the case in most of the English speaking world.

In Argentina the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is a movement of Argentine mothers who campaigned for their children who "disappeared" during the military dictatorship in the country from 1976-83. Similar organisations of women organised as mothers existed in other parts of the continent. Today's young feminists are building links with the individuals from that movement - and taking inspiration from its legacy of determination in the face of inauspicious odds.

Femicide, the murder and death of women resulting from diverse forms of violence (physical, sexual, psychological, in the family, at work or in institutions) originally appeared in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico in 1993 and then increased throughout the country [9]. Today it is now recognized as a global and regional phenomenon in Latin America and an extreme form of violence against women.

The slogan Ni Una Más! (Not one More!) coined by Mexican women protested femicide, which became the slogan Ni Una Menos (Not one less) of the Argentine women 22 years later - today taken up throughout the world - is the palpable evidence of the persistence and the increase of this form of misogynist and macho violence and of the impunity and violation of human rights. Today women in many countries organize to search for their disappeared daughters and to demand state justice in cases of femicide. By taking the name of the victims these campaigns often become emblematic cases.

It's true that the MeToo movement, detonating in the United States, has had a global impact. Women have publicly denounced sexual harassment in different cultural, professional and social spheres and harassment at work thus breaking the silence and at the same time showing the obstacles they face in doing so in a formal framework, and began to establish a legitimacy for public denunciation, but it remains the case that today's wave of feminism is much stronger in Latin countries - with those speaking Spanish at the core of the dynamic - rather than the English speaking ones which detonated earlier waves.

Despite massive technological changes which make communication across continents much more possible than five decades ago and brilliant translation software, language and the cultural practices that evolve around it still play a huge part in political organising.

'The feminist strike' has developed as the new method of struggle of this cycle of mobilizations, not only for its articulating power but fundamentally for what it means by questioning and broadening the strike as a tool of struggle.

The feminist strike breaks the division between the productive and the reproductive, pointing out the interdependence of the two. It involves women withdrawing their labour not only in the sphere of paid labour but also in the hidden reproductive sphere. And it often involves men taking on new responsibility for the later tasks for the day in a way that, just like that first crèche at Ruskin, highlights the inequity and absurdity of the way the world works.

The feminist strike puts the emphasis especially on the reproductive sphere as a strategy to put life at the centre of our organising. From this later point of view it chimes with the concerns of the ecological movement as a whole and in particular the evolution of ecofeminist thought.

If feminists in Britain are regretful that the feminist strike, the central and new organising does not seem to have had the same echo here as elsewhere, then we also need to challenge ourselves to take more concrete actions to bridge the gap over the next 12 months to make sure that on International Women's Day 2021 we are a much more visibly and consciously part of this vital dynamic than today.

We need to find ways of reaching out to and organising with women living in Britain but from countries where the strike has deeper roots. And perhaps we should explore strengthening links with women building trade unions in the gig economy - including, heretically those organising in non-TUC unions.

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P.S.

- Socialist Resistance. 8th March 2020:
<https://socialistresistance.org/fifty-years-of-feminist-organising-in-britain-challenges-for-the-future/19477>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/womens-liberation-a-national-movement>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/women-work-for-free-for-two-months-a-year-says-tuc-analysis>
- [3] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/lf25/lms>
- [4] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/emp17peopleinemploymentonzerohourscontracts/current>
- [5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Women%27s_Liberation_Conference
- [6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ni_una_menos
- [7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erin_Pizzey

[8] <https://www.womensaid.org.uk>

[9] ESSF (article 52351), [Against the current: Femicide in Mexico on the rise and growing more brutal.](#)